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ABSTRACT

An overriding concern in the teaching of literature from cultures other than the instructor's own is how to go about selecting appropriate literature. When selecting course texts, the question should be whether literary scholars write respectfully about the work. A sophomore-level Introduction to African-American Literature course has been structured historically (starting with the Harlem Renaissance) around canonical African-American authors, beginning with Richard Wright's "Native Son" and Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God." A Toni Morrison novel is also taught as is one other contemporary text towards the course's end. Some local African-American history and literature are also included. The course is reading- and writing-intensive. Other classes include a sophomore-level Postcolonial Literature course and a junior-level American Multiethnic Literature course. These courses are begun by trying to subvert the idea of "white" as normal and everyone else as "ethnic" or "other," introducing the idea of white ethnicity. Useful frameworks for considering how people construct their own racial identities and their ideas about other races are William Cross's stages of racial development (in Beverly Daniel Tatum's book "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?") and Louise Damen's chart that maps the stages of culture learning in her book "Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom." The most important elements for getting students to consider their own ethnic identities and the identities of other people are the reading and the writing of portfolios. (Contains 13 references; a sample portfolio handout is appended.) (CR)

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CS

ED 423 530

Melissa Standley

Conference on College Composition and Communication

April 3, 1998

Sharing Stories and Conversation: Teaching Culture(s) in a College Literature Class

I am Melissa Standley, a visiting instructor currently teaching at Florida State University. I am a generalist in English studies, but my specific focus is the study of multiethnic literatures from a postcolonial perspective. This semester I am teaching three courses: Postcolonial Literature and African-American Literature at the sophomore-level and American Multiethnic Literature at the junior level. This is my ninth year of teaching, although I taught English as a Second Language as a volunteer during the year I did not teach for money, so perhaps it is my tenth year. My goal, for the twenty minutes or so that I have been allotted, is to share a sample of my teaching with you in the hope that what I share will begin a conversation. I have brought various handouts; please feel free to take them with you after the session.

How I Select the Literature I Teach

I am fortunate to be teaching in a department that leaves the selection of texts and the writing of syllabi to the individual instructors in most cases. When I consider how I select the literature that I teach, departmental requirements are not my main concern, which frees me to be concerned about other issues.

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When planning the courses I teach, I consider mostly my goals for the course and how the course will fit into the rest of the departmental curriculum. I have some goals that are true for all literature courses I teach: students should read extensively and write extensively about what they read. Students should read texts that they have not read before. Students also should have many chances to express how they read the texts in a variety of forums, graded and ungraded. I privilege the idea of multiple interpretations, which is especially important in the multicultural literature courses I teach; I want students to learn that we do not all read the same texts the same way. I require portfolios in all of my literature classes.

An overriding concern in the teaching of literature from cultures other than my own is how I go about selecting appropriate literature. This is a very important question. Bad choices will adversely affect my goal of literature articulating our cultural differences and helping us to learn to get along. Native American literature in particular is rife with possible bad choices: "Native American" books not written by Native Americans. In his novel Indian Killer, Sherman Alexie shows us a badly-designed Native American literature class, or perhaps a well-designed imperialist project:

> One of the books, The Education of Little Tree, was supposedly written by a Cherokee Indian named Forrest Carter. But Forrest Carter was actually the pseudonym for a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Three of the other books, Black Elk Speaks, Lame Deer: Seeker of Vissions, and Lakota Woman, were taught in almost every Native American Literature class in the country, and purported to autobiographical, though

> all three were co-written by white men. Black Elk himself had disavowed his autobiography, a fact that was conveniently omitted in any discussion of the book. The other seven books included three anthologies of traditional Indian stories edited by white men, two nonfiction studies of Indian spirituality written by white women, a book of traditional Indian poetry translations edited by a Polish-American Jewish man, and an Indian murder mystery written by some local white writer named Jack Wilson, who claimed he was a Shilshomish Indian. (58-9)

So how does one choose appropriate multicultural literature to teach? When I am selecting texts for a course, I ask myself a series of questions about a text before I consider it: Do literary scholars respect this work, or at least this writer? More importantly, do scholars who are of the same culture as the writer presents himself as respect the work or the writer? If not, why not? [Gloria Bird suggests, for example, that Sherman Alexie exploits Native Americans by attempting to invest the colonizer's language with Indianness]. Whether or not literary scholars write respectfully about the work tells me whether other people think the work has merit. What literary scholars who are of the same culture say about a work tells me whether the author is who she claims to be and how her community evaluates her work; it also identifies some of the issues prevalent within that community.

What I Am Teaching This Semester

The sophomore-level Introduction to African-American literature course is described in our catalogue as a course in which students will read major African-American authors. Our department has extensive course offerings in African-American

literature: we regularly run eleven to fourteen sections of this sophomore-level course in addition to several junior-, senior-, and graduate-level African-American literature courses taught by tenure-track faculty. When I designed my course, I conceptualized it as the first of more than one course most of the students would take in our department. I wanted my course to prepare students for the more in-depth work they would encounter in the later courses. I have structured this course historically, around canonical African-American authors; I believe that this would provide a good scaffolding for the later courses, and that it is also important for students who take no other literature courses to realize that African-American literature has a specific literary canon. I tend to privilege novels over other genres. I begin with Richard Wright's Native Son and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God because I like to begin the course with the Harlem Renaissance and with the conflict between those two major figures--it contextualizes a discussion of canon-formation. I nearly always teach a Toni Morrison novel towards the end, and one other contemporary text that I think students might not have read, this semester it is Charles Johnson's Middle Passage. I nearly always include some local African-American history and literature. In Tallahassee, Florida my local texts are Their Eyes Were Watching God and the film Rosewood. The course is reading-intensive and writing-intensive. My lectures generally provide some background in African-American history, beginning with the 1890s and then

corresponding with the texts we read in class. The texts lend themselves well to the historical structure of the course, and usually students have learned enough American history to have some concept of historical events, although most students, sadly, do not have a working knowledge of African-American history.

The sophomore-level Postcolonial Literature course is a relatively new offering in our department. Students may also take a senior-level or graduate-level Postcolonial literature class. The description in the catalogue says that students will read African and Caribbean authors in this course. Postcolonial literature is one of my main research focuses, and my course is somewhat different from the course description. In addition to African and Caribbean literature, I include Latin American and Native American literature because they also fit appropriately into this rubric, Latin American literature by virtue of the economic colonialism of Western powers and Native American literature by virtue of the current colony status of Native American nations in the United States (Morris 56, 57, 68-72). I have structured my syllabus around theory because I believe that the theoretical background of Postcolonial Studies will empower students to re-evaluate a wide variety of texts. There are two units: National Consciousness and Issues of Colonization/ Decolonization. The unit on National Consciousness includes consideration of the Age of Decolonization (the twentieth century), the idea of national consciousness and its pitfalls á la Fanon, historicity, and the function of national myth in the

creation of national consciousness. My students read theoretical articles from The Post-colonial Reader edited by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, and I supplement that with historical lectures, such as the history of Nigeria gaining independence from the British and the history and legal impact of federal Indian policy in the United States. In the National Consciousness unit, students are assigned to read Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Aimé Césaire's Notebook on Return to My Native Land, and Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues. The Issues of Colonization/Decolonization unit covers historicity including a look back at the Age of Colonization [re-history], Calibanismo, the legacy of colonialism, hybridity, the double colonization of women, and Coca-cola Colonialism. Each text in this unit corresponds to a theoretical issue; the text that presents the issue of the legacy of colonialism, for example, is Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born. The focus of the course is European colonization after the point of contact and then the decolonization and efforts to decolonize that have characterized especially the twentieth century. The next time I teach this course, I will most likely pare down the reading list. I have found this semester that students are challenged by the very concepts that underpin the course, such as the idea of history as a text and the United States as a current colonial power, and the reading list is probably too extensive and too challenging in combination with the challenges offered by the concepts.

The junior-level American Multiethnic Literature course is described in the catalogue as a course in which students will read multiethnic writing, such as the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison. This description, of course, immediately sets up the course to duplicate the African-American literature course offerings. I find this course the most difficult one to conceptualize; I think my resistance to it comes from what appears to be the ideological underpinning of the course: The course seems to be the institutional stop-gap measure in which students are to be exposed to as many non-white writers as possible in one semester. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn writes about "Ethnic Studies" Departments replacing "Native American Studies" and other interdisciplinary departments focused around ethnicity as part of the conservative backlash against multicultural studies; she suggests that such hybrid departments water down specific ethnically-important curriculum in favor of a more generalized focus on ethnicity or otherness (Cook-Lynn 17). She is writing about the creation and dissolution of departments, whereas my concern is the conceptualization of courses, but her discussion forces me to question how the Multiethnic Literature course has been conceptualized within my department. I am fortunate to be teaching in a department which has rich course offerings in African-American Literature, Latino/a Literature, and Native American Literature, but I find that many non-English major students take the Multiethnic Literature course as one of their two required multicultural courses. I am concerned that it

reinforces the status quo perception of white majority and everyone-else minority by its very nature: a course that is expected to focus on "all" non-white literature, labelled "ethnic."

My goal for the Multiethnic Literature course, all complaints about its philosophical antecedents aside, is for my students' preconceived notions to be destabilized, for students to discover others' differences so that they might become more sensitive to people of ethnic backgrounds different from theirs. I generally choose to teach texts that I like. In addition, I require students to read supplemental articles that I place on reserve in our library; the articles provide additional information that helps students decode the novels and stories.

I usually begin the course by attempting to subvert the idea of white as "normal" and everyone else as "ethnic" or "other" by introducing the idea of white ethnicity. I want students to be conscious of the past results of not articulating white as an ethnicity, that is what Michael Omi calls the "transpar[ency] of whiteness" (182) and the accompanying unacknowledged white privilege (Frankenberg 17-8). I also want my white students especially to begin to search for what it means to be white; it is my attempt to forestall what Cynthia Hamilton suggests is the almost inevitable replacement of a sense of cultural belonging with white supremacist racism (173). My approach to this is dictated by my own heritage. I usually teach a book from the Appalachian mountains, often something by Sharyn McCrumb, because

I can speak with authority about the distinctness, good and bad, of Appalachian culture and history, and what makes the novels by this writer particularly authentic. Providing students with one model of white ethnicity helps prepare them for recognizing others.

The other texts I select for the Multiethnic Literature course generally reflect the ethnicities that make up American culture and that make up typical classes at Florida State University: that is, Latino/a, African-American, Oriental, and Native American. (This is not meant to be an all-inclusive list). I generally do not have very many Native American students, maybe one or two a semester; I include Native American literature because I want to teach my students that not everyone is accepting of the appropriation of the Seminole as our university's mascot and that Native Americans are actually people, not what the students see at pep rallies and football games.

As I have already suggested, what is lost in a course organized around multicultural literature is the chance to study one culture in-depth, but some things are gained as well. This format does seem to accomplish effectively the goal of articulating our differences in the hope of learning to get along because several often very different perspectives are represented. It also seems to be more destabilizing to the students' preconceptions: students find it more difficult to focus on how any one culture is either similar or radically

different from their own and yet they find patterns of difference from their own cultures. It also seems advantageous when there is at least one author with whom students identify culturally and at least one with whom they identify emotionally but with whom they do not share cultural ties. Teaching a text by an author with whom students identify culturally validates their culture and ultimately themselves, while finding an author they love who is of a different culture is one way of beguiling them into beginning to respect what another cultural perspective has to offer. Teaching a wide variety of texts makes finding an author students love more likely, although of course it is not guaranteed.

The Process of Culture Learning

I have encountered two very useful frameworks for considering how people construct their own racial identities and their ideas about other races. I am going to share them both here. I will talk about how people construct their own racial identities first because I believe that some sense of self is necessary before someone can consider how she perceives others of different ethnicities, although both ideas, self and other, begin to inform each other.

A helpful framework in considering how a person develops her own sense of racial identity is William Cross' five stages of racial development, discussed by Beverly Daniel Tatum in her book, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?. Tatum explains that the five stages are pre-

encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization/ commitment (54-5). Tatum is discussing these stages in relation to African-American children, but she makes the point that they are generally applicable to people of all races, although not all white people are forced to consider their racial identity the way non-white people are. I would add that these stages do not necessarily occur in order, and not necessarily during childhood, which is how they are presented. The pre-encounter stage is usually the point at which a person is unaware of her racial identity. The encounter stage is when something forces an awareness of racial identity upon the person, usually in a traumatic way if the person is not white. Immersion/emersion is a response to one's growing awareness of racial identity; a person surrounds herself with symbols of her own racial identity and friends who are like herself. The internalization stage is when the person has attained a sense of security about her own racial identity and is willing to establish meaningful relationships across group boundaries. The internalization/commitment stage is when the person turns her own sense of security about racial identity into a personal commitment to political action.

One of the most useful ideas I have encountered in my thinking about teaching multicultural literature is Louise Damen's chart that maps the stages of culture learning in her book about ESL pedagogy Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom. Damen's chart is based on earlier work

with culture learning done by E. Kleinjans (1972) and R. Porter and L. Samovar (1982). Synthesizing this work implies that the more familiar a learner becomes with another culture, the more complex is her learning about the culture, and the synthesis provides some stages for this familiarity and learning. Of course every student does not follow the domains and stages articulated in the chart; the chart does, however, provide a useful framework with which to begin thinking about the process students go through when they learn about other cultures.

THE PATHS OF CULTURE LEARNING*

		Levels of Culture Learning		
Stage	Cultural/ Social Distance	(cognitive/affective)	(action)	Degrees of Acculturation
1	Maximum	Little or no knowledge of THEM Low awareness	Little interaction; stereotypic	Ethnocentrism
2		Some knowledge; brief experience Awareness of superficial or "exotic" features	Intellectual interest; some analysis	Euphoria
3		Much more knowledge and contact Greater awareness of differences	More analysis; evaluation; disorientation	Conflict !!!!SHOCK!!!!!
4		Knowledge, experience, and understanding Awareness of important similarities/differences	Accepting; tolerance of the new	Reintegration
5	Minimum	Understanding; insight Empathy; -emic point of view	Interactive; mediating	Assimilation Adaptation Adjustment

*This chart is from Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom by Louise Damen. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987. 218.

The domains represented in the chart suggest, of course, that students' beginning knowledge of other cultures is very limited, characterized mostly by students' own ethnocentrism and stereotypes about other cultures. Students go through a euphoric stage when they begin to learn about other cultures; this stage is characterized by a focus on the "exotic" elements of other cultures. The final stage of the chart is characterized by empathy, a sense of adaptation or adjustment on the part of students.

My purpose as a teacher of multicultural literature is to ask students to consider their own sense of racial identity and to move them forward along the continuum of learning about other cultures/ethnicities. My ultimate purpose is to destabilize students' preconceptions about people of other ethnicities by confronting them with multicultural literature; I want students to learn that there are multiple other perspectives, and I want them to begin thinking about how to get along with people who have some of these other perspectives.

The two most important elements of my classes for getting students to consider their own ethnic identities and the identities of other people are the reading and the writing of portfolios. Students need to be challenged by being confronted by perspectives that are alien to them. And students must be

given a space in which to write their reactions to these alien perspectives. I am not suggesting that the study of non-Western European texts requires the blessing of a Western theoretical perspective, but I find this quote by Mikhail Bakhtin useful in considering my students' thinking processes:

> A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closeedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere). Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each [culture] retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched. (Bakhtin 7)

If my agenda is to get students to have greater understanding of other cultures and other perspectives, it follows that I must have a way built into the structure of the course for students to bring their own "serious and sincere" questions to the classroom discussion. Students must also have a place to express their anxiety and often their anger at being confronted with very unfamiliar ideas and perspectives, whether they share their anxiety and anger with their small groups or not. All responses to the texts must be at least one page, single-spaced. I tell students that I do not want summaries, that these responses will be graded ultimately on whether they have "engaged the texts."

By that I mean that students should read the texts and then write about specific things from them that they have questions about, or that they don't understand, or that remind them of something in their personal lives. I also want them to interpret what they have read. (Please see my handouts for evaluation criteria). I generally get responses that do all of these things. I encourage students either to turn in individual responses before they turn in the portfolios to be graded, or to come to my office with a response so that we can have an informal conference about it; I comment very heavily and thoroughly on any responses that I get, especially very early in the course.

Does It Work?

All of this talk about how I conceptualize courses and choose the texts and structure the classes leads to the next big question: How are my classes going? The students in my classes are generally interested, passionate, and well-prepared for class; they are not often absent, they pay attention in class and contribute readily to the ongoing discussion, for the most part they turn in their portfolios on time. At least a third of them turn in responses early to get some feedback on them, and occasionally, a student tells me she has a really creative, off-the-wall idea for a response. Class discussion is brisk, and often takes unexpected [even by me] turns. Almost a fourth of my students this semester are students that I have taught before, although that may be because I am teaching courses that many students need in order to fulfill certain requirements.

Not everything in these courses is sunshine and roses. Problems do come up, but I think many of those problems are related to students' processes of adjusting to the multicultural curriculum. One problem I sometimes have is students who attempt to distract the class, presumably because they have not read the material or have had trouble understanding the material. Students attempting to displace attention from themselves will do things like ask a question from page 5 of Invisible Man when the rest of us are discussing Chapter 15, as one man did, or will tell me that his essay quiz grade should have been a B+ instead of a C- because I only made two negative comments on it and that was how a point system worked, he'd learned in his education class. Or students may make general announcements like "I have already read too much material like this in other classes and I am not interested in reading more." Another problem that comes up is the manifestation of anger from white students when the class is discussing issues of white privilege. Students may say things like "minority students get all kinds of privileges and special scholarships, and it's not fair" or they may write in portfolios comments like "...the entire content of the course seems to be about how these different minority groups have been oppressed. [It was not, of course.] We could have covered this during the first week and then moved on...." Or students may attack the literature being read: "Tracks [by Louise Erdrich] is a bad novel: it has no clear plot, poor characterizations, and not much point that I can find...." Non-white students may also

manifest anger at having a white teacher in a multicultural literature class. One African-American student wanted to know if someone else in the department could grade his portfolio [which had received a C+ at midterm], while another non-white student informed me during the final conference that "the class put you through a lot, of course, you being white and all, but you did okay, I guess...." There is no easy answer for any of these problems that come up, except that many of them are the result of students who are angry because they have been confronted with unfamiliar ideas or students who are angry because they are having to deal with a white teacher of minority literature while they are in the encounter stage, or perhaps just when they really felt the need for a non-white professional role model.

Many times things go much better than my sharing of the problems that come would indicate. Last semester I received the following comments in a student's final portfolio self-evaluation:

> Upon entering this course, I did not really think of myself as part of an ethnic group. Growing up white and middle class in America seemed to make me anti-ethnic, meaning that what was colorful, exuberant and interesting (what I considered ethnic) about me seemed to be annihilated, like anti-matter, leaving only Wonder Bread, Malibu Barbie and Donnie Osmond....
>
> As an adult, I have begun to have doubts about the approach to race and culture I have been taught. My white, liberal politics are not working in a world in which racial and cultural lines are simultaneously blurring and being more sharply, and sometimes violently, drawn. My inability to acknowledge myself as part of white, rather than American, culture, does not allow me to admit my ignorance, anger, frustration or prejudices. It assumes that I am able to easily see all other cultures objectively, since I am not coming from a specific cultural paradigm myself. This

> assumption is almost as dangerous, and certainly as ludicrous, as the assumption that my race or culture is somehow superior. To fully accept myself, intellectually and emotionally, as part of a distinct ethnic group is to give myself permission to bungle attempts at cultural/racial exchange, to lay my metaphoric cards on the table, recognizing that I am coming from a specific cultural paradigm, that I carry both socially-instilled and experience-fortified stereotypes of other cultures. And then I can better engage in dialogue that breaks apart those stereotypes at their source.

Sharon's comments are not atypical of response I get from many of my students after my courses end, except that she is more eloquent than many other students.

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Handout on Portfolios

Portfolios

The portfolios will contain at least one one-page, single-spaced response for each work, or section of critical essays, we have read. If you wish, you may return later to the works with additional pages of response. You may also include responses to any extra-curricular activities that are relevant to the coursework. All writing included in the portfolio must be typed, single-spaced, and in ten- or twelve-point font. All responses must be **at least one full page long**. Your portfolio should be presented in a manila folder with the list of required responses first, then the responses in the same order they are listed, and then the self-evaluation. Everything is to be neatly typed; responses with more than one page are to be stapled or paper clipped together.

The responses are to be based upon your thoughtful analysis of the works we have read. They should not be summaries. They should be thoughtful pieces of writing that express your interpretation of each work, containing specific references from the work, discussion of other works (from class or outside of class) that relate to it, and perhaps your assessment of it. Try to address why the work was included in the course syllabus.

Self-evaluations

In addition to the individual responses, your portfolio will contain a self-evaluation at the midterm point and another one at the final point. The self-evaluation will be the thoughtful, typed responses to questions. The purpose of the self-evaluation is to give you a chance to synthesize your learning from the course, to examine how the individual works you have read relate to each other and to the course content as a whole. The portfolios are also to give you the chance to show how much you have made the content of the course part of your own intellectual makeup...in other words, to show what you have learned.

Grading

As it states in your syllabus, the midterm and final portfolios together constitute 70% of your final grade for the course. It is very important that you take them seriously. It is also important that you use the portfolio as a learning tool rather than just a grading instrument.

You are required to turn responses in each week. The first two will receive my extensive comments and reactions before they are graded in the portfolio, and you may revise them before turning them back in. I strongly urge you to take advantage of this, or to come by my office during my office hours if you have questions. The portfolios will be graded using the attached rubric. The grades will be based on the following:

organization: Are the responses in the same order as the works were read?

completeness: Did you do all of the required responses?

thoughtfulness: Does what you have said reflect genuine thought about what you have read? Does your writing go beyond the easy answer, the typical?

specificity: Do your responses contain specific examples from the texts? Does your self-evaluation answer the questions in a clear and specific way?

excellence: Does your writing go beyond the minimum requirement?

engagement: Do you relate the works and the course content to your own experience?

synthesis: Does the writing in your portfolio reflect some understanding of how the works read in the course and the materials, lectures, and discussions presented in class all relate to each other?

written expression: Do you support the assertions you make? Are the responses and the self-evaluations well-written?

professionalism: Is your portfolio neatly organized in a manila folder? How correct are the grammar, spelling, and punctuation?